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Basket forms: one woman's cure

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BASKET FORMS: ONE WOMAN'S CURE

by

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To those who have brought me tears

and to those who have brought me laughter

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis report is divided into two sections. The first section, The Tradition of Baskets, is the soil that this thesis is rooted in. This section, presented in the form of two essays, is a collection of information gathered mainly from books on basketry. The information is selected and organized with a specific purpose. The essay on baskets is a cultural and historical look at baskets and basketwork. Its purpose is to broaden the reader's definition of a basket as well as to give historical information. Because baskets are symbolic of the people making them, the second essay is on basketmakers. It is intended to give insight into what motivates basketmakers, the basketmakers relationship to her materials and processes, and what baskets mean to those who create them.

This section was written because tradition is important. This tradition of baskets and basketmakers is largely why basketry was chosen as the form of expression for this thesis.

The second section of this thesis report is a collection of information of a different nature. It comes from a variety of sources not directly related to baskets, but directly related to the artist, where she came from, and what she feels close to. The sources range from the writings of contemporary artists, poets, and authors to the personal observations of the artist.

SECTION I

The Tradition of Baskets

BASKETS

"Oh, Daddy dear, what is a basket?"
Said a youthful and mischievous elf;
"All baskets, me boy, are children of joy,
In fact you're a basket yourself!"
ANON

Baskets appeal to nearly everyone. They please our visual and tactile senses. Their substantial appearance and regularity of workmanship give a sense of strength and order that comforts us. They fit easily into our daily lives. With grace and style they hide our dirty laundry, shelter our pets, hold our homemade breads, and harbor our secret poems and letters.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines basket very simply at first as, "a vessel of wickerwork made of plaited osiers, cane rushes, bast or other materials". When asked to define basket most people will describe certain characteristics that are consistent with the dictionary definition. They say that a basket is a single object that can be held and which holds things, that is made of certain materials and that is constructed in certain ways. A physical description, however, is not the total essence. The word basket carries with it connotations beyond mere physical characteristics. The Oxford English Dictionary goes beyond it's initial definition to give two columns of literary, historical, and cultural references to baskets. These references along with the physical description give a better look at the essence of baskets.

A good place to begin looking closer at the essence of baskets might be to look at the basket as a container. It is clear that baskets

by their very nature are containers. However, history can considerably expand the notion of what baskets can contain. The Bible alone mentions several functional baskets such as the sal, used for carrying unleavened bread, the salsilloth, for gathering grapes, the tene, for ordinary household purposes, as well as the tebhah that the infant Moses was placed in.

Historically people, too, have been contained in a variety of baskets. The wicker furniture of today is reminiscent of the wicker chairs used in ancient Rome. The biblical reference to the infant Moses recalls the centuries that baskets have served as cradles in a number of cultures. Baskets have also been coffins for a great many cultures. In A.D. 60 the citizens of Glastonbury in Britain are said to have built a wickerwork church not unlike the primitve wattle-work huts of the Northern Europeans. Wicker and rush vessels covered with skins were used as boats by the Assyrians as early as the 5th century B.C. The Romans, Spanish and Gauls were among the ancient people that used wickerwork carriages and carts. One of the more bizarre accounts of baskets as containers for people came from Caesar, who reported that the ancient Druids of Gaul made huge figures of wickerwork which were "filled with human victims and burnt as a sacrifice to their gods."[1]

When considering baskets in their historical context it becomes easy to extend the idea of baskets beyond vessels to include other types of objects made of basket-like materials. In Virgil's account of the war against the Trojans, he speaks of wickerwork helmets and

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[1]H.H. Bobart, Basketwork Through The Ages (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 56.

wicker-framed shields. The steeple hats worn by fifteenth century women appear to have been made of basketwork covered with linen. In rural areas of China, Japan and some South East Asian countries raincoats of twined straw were commonplace. Many Asian people still wear hats that are nothing more than cone shaped baskets with wide rims. It's not difficult to see a relationship between baskets and straw hats still worn today.

Other aspects that come to light when considering history and culture are legends and myths. The Potawtami Indians tell of a woman in the moon weaving a basket. The legend is that when the basket is finished the world will end. As the woman is nearly finished a dog (representing an eclipse) pulls the basket apart and the woman has to begin all over again. The Yuki Indians of California account for the apparent movement of the sun in an equally quaint legend. Their legend tells of a mythical spirit finding several suns hanging in baskets. Stealing the basket with the brightest sun, he carries it to his own dark world. He hangs the basket in the East, but unable to get proper light is required to constantly move the basket.

Baskets also appear to have played a part in the occult world. Writings on witchcraft in New Zealand reported that priests wove baskets of flax to hold the spirits of their enemies. While in other cultures it was said that the souls of victims were captured in special baskets to which the victims heads were later added.

Exactly where and when the first basket was made is unknown. Baskets existed before pottery and weaving. Seemingly a result of prehistoric peoples gathering practices, they were a simple, direct, and

non-verbal response to life. The craft of basketmaking was perfected very early in history. There is evidence of well made baskets in Egypt as early as 5000 B.C. The making of baksets was the first time in history that materials had been used logically, orderly, and systematically to make an object that was completely expressive of the process. Furthermore, because basketry was so easily perfected, the techniques used to make Neolithic baskets are most likely the same coiling, plaiting, and twining techniques used by basketmakers around the world now.

The baskets of today are similar to the Predynastic Egyptian baskets, biblical baskets and the baskets of the New Zealand witchdoctors in ways other than technique. They are still a direct straightforward response to life. They still express strong beliefs, hopes, and fears, and still functional in that they still hold our bread and our babies. Yet, they are more. Baskets have gone beyond traditional limitations to function as art.

BASKETMAKERS

> Baskets are the Indian woman's poems;
> The shaping of them her sculpture.
> They wove into them the story of their
> life and love.
>
> NAVJO SCHOOL OF INDIAN BASKETRY

Perhaps it is not surprising that basketmakers, like most craftsmen, have remained essentially anonymous through the years. After all, when something has served mankind as long and as well as the basket has, both the object and the maker tend to become commonplace and are eventually taken for granted. Almost until the beginning of the twentieth century industrialized western societies showed very little interest in the basket as either art or artifact. Then in the years before World War I, as America started to become conscious of its land, resource conservation, and the material values of the Indian culture, this began to change. The Arts and Crafts Movement had already fostered a new sensitivity for crafts, and basketry, particularly North American Indian basketry, came to the public's attention.

It may be the exquisite grace and beauty of Indian baskets that makes Indian basketmakers the most interesting of all basketmakers. Much of the early information on traditional Indian basketmakers came from the research of Otis Mason and George James. James in his 1901 book on Indian basketry gave good insight into the Indian basketmaker when he wrote:

> Indian basketry is almost entirely the work of Indian women, and, therefore, its study necessarily leads us into

> the sanctum-sanctorum of feminine Indian life. The thought of the woman, the art development, the acquirement of skill, the appreciation of color, the utilization of crude material for her purposes, the labor of gathering the materials, the objects she had in view in the manufacture of her baskets, the methods she followed to attain those objects, her failures, her successes, her conception of art, her more or less successful attempts to imitate the striking objects of Nature with which she came in contact, the aesthetic qualities of mind that led her to desire to thus reproduce or imitate Nature--all these, and a thousand other things in the Indian woman's life, are discoverable in an intelligent study of Indian basketry.[2]

Information on other basketmakers is not nearly as eloquently presented as that on Indian basketmakers. In fact, it is nearly impossible to find information that gives any insight at all into early European or American basketmakers. The information on early English basketmakers is limited to names on church, craft guild, and public tax records. From these sources it appears that the basketmakers were mainly men practicing the craft for economic reasons. Information on early American basketmakers is similarly limited to inventory and sales records kept by families, individuals and groups that made and sold baskets. Apparently both men and women made baskets with the men making the cruder heavier baskets and the women weaving smaller finer household baskets. Any insight into the basketmakers feelings or attitudes is left to speculation.

Considering the nature of basketmaking, it's probable that, given the chance, nearly all basketmakers would have something to say about their work. Basketmaking is largely repetitive work involving one

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[2]George Wharton James, Indian Basketry (New York: Henry Malkan, 1901), pp. 14-15.

person whose chief tools are a pair of skilled hands and a trained eye. Some people see basketmaking as something of a ritual:

> . . . he appears to be involved with manipulating his materials in a trance-like reverie, . . . He sits quietly, calm and concentrated . . . The worker's eyes or the tips of his fingers are always appraising the form developing from the manipulation . . . The hand has not been extended by tools; . . . no separation implied or actual exists between the worker and his materials. They, the worker and the materials, seem a self-sufficient functioning unit.[3]

Yet, it's unrealistic to think that all basketmakers view their process in such a romantic light.

What is realistic is the effect that the basketmaker's attitude and circumstances have on her work and how she perceives it. The American Indian woman, for example, uses essentially the same processes and materials to make her baskets as she did when George James observed her in 1901. Her circumstances, however, have certainly changed. It's no longer necessary for her to make every cooking and storage pot she needs. Now that her main motivation for making baskets is to sell to tourists, it's rather doubtful that she feels about her baskets as she once did nor that she puts as much of herself into them.

Accordingly, our modern, industrialized society has brought about a new group of basketmakers. These basketmakers are not necessarily concerned with the function of their baskets. Consequently, they are

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[3]Ed Rossbach, Baskets as Textile Art (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1973), p. 189.

not bound by tradition to materials or forms. Yet their baskets reveal as much about them, their life, and their attitudes as did the Indian woman's baskets. These are the artist/craftsmen who make baskets as a form of personal expression.

SECTION II

The Thesis

THE THESIS

> I trust an artist; I mistrust trends. Art is born of individual drama and just as our faces differ, so do our works - their puposes and aims.
>
> Magadelena Abakanowicz

MATERIALS

This thesis is about people. It is also about materials. As the poet uses words to build poems, the artist uses materials to build objects. When a person looks at an object in a gallery, it is materials and the use of them that the viewer sees. It is only through the artist's choice and manipulation of materials that the viewer knows what the artist is saying.

In order to communicate through materials the artist must be sensitive to them, understand them, work closely, and actively with them. If an artist is speaking of human situations and emotions in her work, then it would seem appropriate to use materials with human relationships. The Polish artist Magadelena Abakanowicz uses great sensitivity and insight in manipulating materials into strong personal statements.

It is enlightening to hear Abakanowicz talk about her materials. At a fiberworks symposium she spoke of fibers as the basic elements constructing the organic world on this planet. She pointed out that all living organisms are fiberous structures--plant tissue, leaves, human nerves, veins, and muscles. She even compared human skin to a fabric

covering our bodies and souls--a fabric that can be cut and sewn to give access to the body's insides.

Vegetable fibers, both in their natural state and twisted into rope, are the primary materials used in this thesis. They are strong and flexible. They allow themselves to be twisted, wrapped and tied into knots, yet they retain their identity and dignity. Sometimes with a great deal of coaxing, sometimes with a minimum of resistance, they yield to the sculptors hands. They are, by nature, a pleasing subtle color. Yet they will gracefully take color from a dye pot. They are tactile and sensitive. Like baskets, they have a past of their own. Because of these qualities, their essence is female.

While it is true that strength, flexibility and sensitivity are not qualities necessarily limited to women, it is the presence of these qualities in women that this thesis is about. Considering the feminine emphasis, one might expect strong female images. It must be remembered, however, that this thesis is simply woman-oriented; it is not a feminist manifesto. The work is about people--both men and women. For every woman that feels bound by society's chains, there must surely be a man feeling equally restricted by society's expectations.

STRENGTH

Strength is an important concept in this thesis, and is expressed in the choice of materials. The most obviously strong materials are, of course, the chains (Plate 5, page 25), the barbed wire (Plates 6, 7 and 8, pages 26, 27 and 28) and the wood and nails (Plate 9, page 29). The strength in these materials is a rigid, masculine sort of strength.

In most of these examples the metal and wood use either an unnecessary force or, as in Blue Bound Form (Plate 7, page 27), use an implied force to contain the fiberous elements. Their strength is obvious and the force they exert seems to come naturally. After all, these materials are manufactured to be strong and rigid. They are intended to resist insensitively those things that might try to come close or to penetrate them. If chains, barbed wire, wood and nails are a metaphor for men, then the manufacturing of these elements is a metaphor for a society that produces a rigid, insensitive strength.

There is another less obvious statement of strength in this body of work which is also reflected in the choice of materials. The materials in this case are the fibers--sisal, raffia and reed. A great deal of the strength of these materials come from their flexibility. The ability to yield under pressure means survival. A basket of reed and raffia will most likely survive a fall from a table unharmed, while a glass bowl will shatter from the same fall.

BEAUTY

The work immediately preceding this thesis was a series of baskets. They were baskets in the traditional sense; they were vessels constructed mainly of traditional materials using traditional basketry techniques. The colors were pretty, and the forms were pleasing. Those baskets appealed to the majority of people that saw them. People called them pretty, lovely, cute, beautiful or simply nice. In fact most of those baskets were either sold or traded. Yet they seemed to lack something. They were nice to look at and to hold, but they gave noth-

ing to think about. Their beauty was an empty beauty; it had no substance.

The basket Storage Unit One (Plate 1, page 21) was in reaction to that empty, physical beauty. The form is large and almost cumbersome in appearance. It's heavy; the irregular coils bulge with fibers. The form bulges as if pregnant. In fact the basket is reminiscent of an ancient fertility goddess. In spite of the basket's lack of beauty, it has something to say. It speaks of honesty by not distracting from its form with pretty colors. It speaks of openness by allowing its sisal core to burst through its raffia wrapping to give additional access to its interior. It boldly displays its bulbous form.

After Storage Unit One, it seemed appropriate to give some consideration to the one basket remaining from the previous series. It was a nice little basket (Plate 2, page 22), but nothing more. The form seemed to ramble a bit taking advantage of devices, such as coils that ran along the surface of the basket, for no particular reason. Thus, the original basket was cut into several irregular pieces and sewn back together with the same coiling technique that constructed the basket in the first place. It was a new basket.

The new basket, Second Construction (Plate 3, page 23) was much stronger both visually and structurally. Like a person who has been torn apart and put herself back together, it was a tighter, more interesting form. The open spaces, frayed edges and irregularities in form have a reason for being. The basket gives the viewer something to think about.

The last basket in the group that dealt with the concept of beauty is titled Scarred Basket (Plate 4, page 24). Again, like someone who has weathered rough weather, fallen apart and put herself together with big stitches, the scars that divide the surface of the basket make the form more interesting.

TRAPPED FIBERS

An important concept presented in this thesis is that of entrapment; the idea of being allured to a place or situation only to find that it eventually turns into a trap. It is expressed with the binding, wrapping or otherwise trapping of fibers by materials insensitive to their nature. For example in the basket titled Intentional Entanglements (Plate 5, page 25) the long, narrow, brightly colored sisal elements appear to have happily wrapped themselves around each other to create a configuration pleasing to their nature. At the top the fibers are free to reach out into the world around them; at the bottom they gladly congregate to form a bottom to the basket. The lock and chain, however, turn this comfortable arrangement into something more threatening.

Fish Hooks, Empty Space and Barbed Wire (Plate 6, page 26) has a similar message. In this case, however, the barbed wire binds so strongly that it squeezes the space out of the basket entirely. Blue Bound Form (Plate 7, page 27) and Rose Thorns (Plate 8, page 28) are variations on the idea of trapped or bound fibers. While the barbed wire may be looser and the rope soft and pink, they still keep us in our place.

Probably the strongest example of entrapment is the work called This Is Where I Live (Plate 9, page 29). It is not a basket at all, but large wrapped segments of fiber, similar to segments of a coiled basket, trapped in a heavy wooden frame. The fiber segments would like to escape their fate, but freedom has its price. In the case of the fiber segments the price would be leaving some of the fibers nailed to the sides of the crate.

IMPERMANENCE

Although not immediately obvious, impermanence is a characteristic of this thesis. To begin with, the materials are destined to eventual decay. Since the fibers were once living things, they are no more durable than any other living thing. They are mortal.

The impermanence, however, comes from a conviction stronger than the simple mortality of materials. It comes from a belief that our affluent society puts too much time, money and energy into collecting material possessions. While it may be fine to surround ourselves with objects that make our lives easier and more pleasant, all too many of these objects will outlive their usefulness and end up in a garbage dump. Art very often falls into the category of objects that outlive their usefulness. Magadelena Abakanowicz expressed this conviction well:

> Creating something that is more lasting than myself would multiply the imperishable dust heap of human ambitions crowding the environment. If my thoughts and imaginings as well as the shapes that I create turn, like myself, into dust this will be a good thing. There is so little room.[3]

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[3] Abakanowicz (New York: Abberville Press, 1982), pp. 101-102.

This belief has effected the work presented in this thesis. First of all, it gives a sense of responsibility to present as finished works only those objects that honestly have something to offer. Next, this thinking tends to make objects, even objects created slowly and laboriously, less precious. When considering our art in context of decades or even centuries, the importance of each object become something to question. The sense of responsibility combined with the less precious objects makes it fairly easy to take a saw to a basket or to reuse materials from a piece that never quite worked.

CONCLUSION

Making art is a habit. It's a habit of looking, seeing, listening, reading, thinking, questioning, and feeling, and then translating the products of those processes into objects through the manipulation of materials.

This thesis is neither the beginning nor the end of that habit. An artist's work is a continuum that runs through her entire life. Graduate school and the thesis are simply a part of that life and that continuum. It is a time in the artist's life when she approaches her work with more intensity, thought, and concentration. It's a time when she begins to see more clearly what it will take to support her habit. It's a time when she learns more about herself and about self-discipline than ever before. Graduate school and the thesis are also, a time when the artist sees truth in the poet's words:

> The reason people want M.F.A.'s,
> take workshops with fancy names
> when all you can really
> learn is a few techniques,
> typing instructions and some-
> body else's mannerisms
>
> is that every artist lacks
> a license to hang on the wall
> like your optician, your vet
> proving you may be a clumsy sadist
> whose fillings fall into the stew
> but you're certifed a dentist.

> The real writer is one
> who really writes. Talent
> is an invention like phlogiston
> after the fact of fire.
> Work is its own cure. You have to
> like it better than being loved.[4]

This thesis is many things, but it is not an end.

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[4]Marge Piercy, "For The Young Who Want To," in The Moon Is Always Female, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1981), Stanzas 4-6, lines 19-36.

PLATES

PLATE 1

Storage Unit One
24" High

PLATE 2

Original Basket
5" High 9½" Diameter

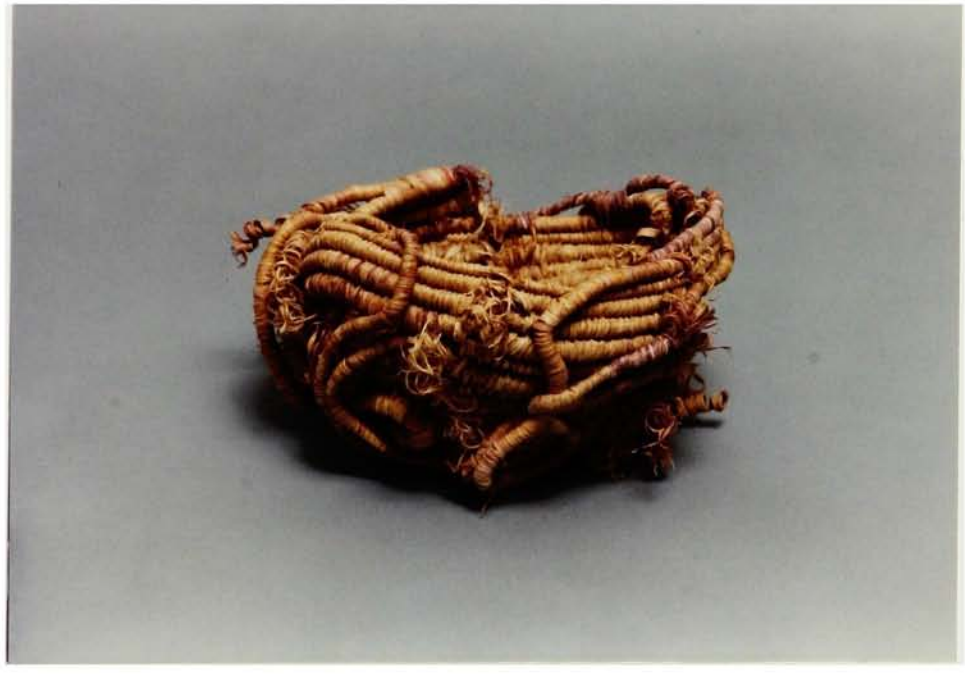

PLATE 3

Second Construction
5" High 8" Diameter

PLATE 4

Scarred Basket
18" High

PLATE 5

Intentional Entanglements
35" High

PLATE 6

Fish Hooks, Empty Space and Barbed Wire
34" High

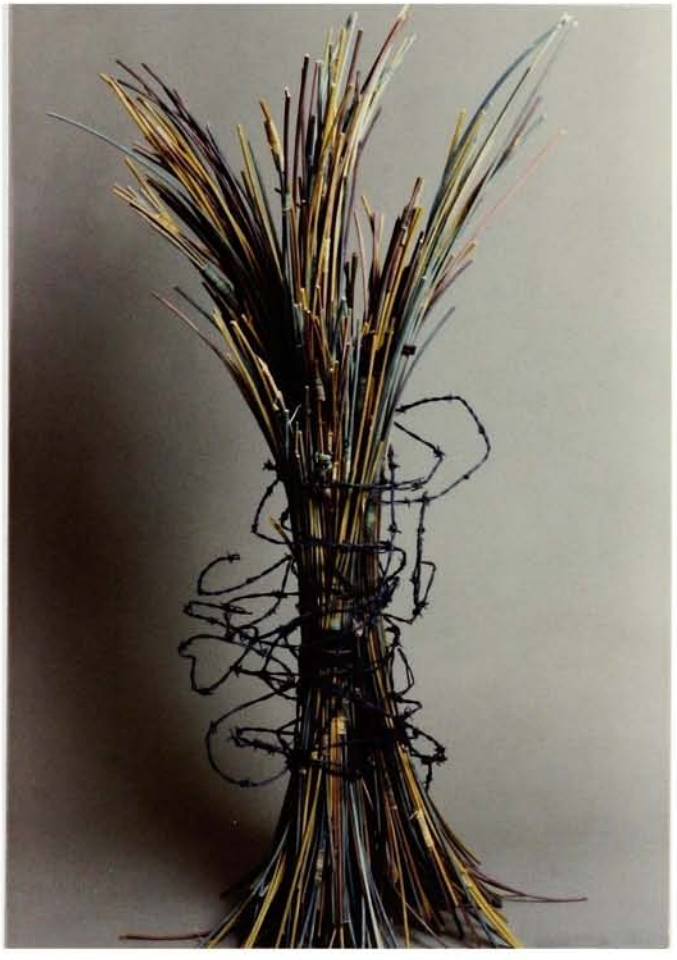

PLATE 7

Blue Bound Form
60" High

PLATE 8

Rose Thorns
58" High

PLATE 9

This Is Where I Live
53" × 24" × 26"

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